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ABSTRACT

This study explored mothers' beliefs about their children's educational and occupational futures, and it examined relationships between mothers' beliefs and children's academic achievement and between mothers' beliefs and maternal perceptions of parental responsibilities. A sample of 141 mothers and their first- or fourth-grade child participated in the study. The mothers had relatively low levels of formal education and annual household incomes. During interviews, mothers answered questions about the type of job they expected their child would hold as an adult and the type of job they believed would be ideal for their child. Mothers also completed a questionnaire designed to measure ideas about parental responsibilities. In addition, report card grades and standardized achievement scores were obtained from the child's school. The study found that the children of mothers who believed their child would attain the amount of education needed for the ideal and expected job had significantly higher report card grades and standardized achievement scores than did the children of mothers who thought the ideal job required more education than the child would receive. Mothers who believed their child would attain the amount of education needed for the ideal and the expected job had significantly higher parental responsibility scores than did mothers who believed their child would not attain the amount of education necessary for the ideal job. (Author/BGC)

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Educational/Occupational Expectations and Aspirations:

Mothers' Views of their Children's Futures

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Abstract

This study was conducted to describe mothers' beliefs about their children's educational and occupational futures, and to examine relationships between mothers' beliefs and a) children's academic achievement and b) maternal perceptions of parental responsibilities. During an individual interview, mothers answered questions about the type of job they *expect* their child will hold as an adult and the type of job they believe would be *ideal* for their child to hold as an adult. Mothers also completed a questionnaire designed to measure their ideas about parental responsibilities. Children's report card grades and standardized achievement scores were obtained from the child's school. A sample of 141 mothers and their first- or fourth-grade child participated in the study. The mothers had relatively low levels of formal education and relatively low annual household incomes. The children of mothers who believed their child will attain the amount of education needed for the ideal and the expected job had significantly higher report card grades and standardized achievement scores than did the children of mothers who thought the ideal job required more education than the child will receive. Further, mothers who believed their child is likely to attain the amount of education needed for the ideal and the expected job had significantly higher parental responsibility scores than did mothers who believed their child will not attain the amount of education necessary for the ideal type of job. Implications of the associations are discussed.

Educational/Occupational Expectations and Aspirations: Mothers' Views of their Children's Futures

Parents' expectations and aspirations for their children's futures are generally considered important contributors to the academic and vocational routes children pursue throughout development and formal schooling (Rodman, 1963; Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman & Hemphill, 1991). Research supports the conclusion that high achieving children tend to come from families with parents who have high educational and occupational expectations and aspirations for their child's future (Alexander & Entwisle, 1988; Okagaki & Sternberg, 1993; Seginer, 1983; Snow, et al, 1991).

This study was conducted to describe mothers' beliefs about their children's educational and occupational futures, and to examine relationships between mothers' beliefs and a) children's academic achievement and b) maternal perceptions of parental responsibilities. This investigation into maternal expectations and aspirations differs from previous research in that we studied the range of mothers' beliefs regarding the type of job mothers realistically *expect* their child will hold as an adult and the type of job mothers believe would be *ideal* for their child to hold as an adult. Specifically, we examined how many mothers in the sample reported a difference, referred to as an aspiration differential, in the type of job they expect and they believe would be ideal for the child's future. Further, we examined differences in children's academic achievement and maternal perceptions of responsibility by the mothers' aspiration differential.

Over 30 years ago Rodman's (1963) classic work on parental aspirations and socioeconomic status prompted a conceptualization of parental aspirations as a range of beliefs and values rather than a level or type. Rodman argued that while both middle and lower socioeconomic status parents may adhere to traditional middle-class values, lower socioeconomic status parents may be more likely to

accept a wider range of options for the child's future than middle socioeconomic parents. Thus, the difference between parents in the two socioeconomic groups is not in the level of their aspiration, per se, rather it is in the range of options a parent views as acceptable. Rodman referred to this phenomenon as the lower-class "value stretch."

In addition to Rodman's work, major advances in understandings of parent beliefs have come from research that compares the aspirations of parents belonging to different subgroups of the population. For example, between group comparisons have been made on the ideas held by parents from diverse cultures (e.g., Okagaki & Sternberg, 1993; Stevenson, & Lee, 1990), from different socioeconomic status groups (for a review see Hoff-Ginsberg & Tardiff, 1995), from different ethnic groups (for a review see Coll, Meyer, & Brillon, 1995), and from different educational backgrounds (Snow, et al., 1990, p. 64). An often overlooked aspect of parental aspirations, however, is within subgroup variability. As pointed out by Zigler (1970) in referring to Head Start parents, it is important to avoid overgeneralizing parents within one subgroup. Since the 1970s others have issued the same caution (Harrison, Wilson, Pine, Chan, & Buriel, 1990; Coll, et al, 1995, p.204). The parenting literature is replete with evidence showing that the determinants of parenting come from a rich mix of personal, cultural, and environmental factors (Belsky, 1984; Hoff-Ginsberg & Tardif, 1995, p.161), rather than from a single context or setting (e.g., socioeconomic class, ethnicity, etc.). Thus, one primary purpose of this study is to examine the range of mothers' beliefs about their children's futures in a sample of mothers who are relatively homogeneous in terms of formal education and family income.

To examine the range of mothers' beliefs about their children's futures, we adapted aspiration measurement strategies from Della Fave (1974), Rodman and Voydanoff (1978), and Seginer (1983) to investigate a "maternal aspiration

differential." The aspiration differential is defined as the difference between two sets of maternal beliefs, namely, mothers' expectations and mothers' aspirations. The first set of beliefs, the expected beliefs, are beliefs about what type of job the mother realistically expects the child will have as an adult, taking into account real-life constraints such as financial circumstances, educational opportunities, child motivation, etc. The second set of beliefs, the ideal beliefs, are mothers' beliefs about the type of job that would be ideal for their children to attain as adults. The ideal beliefs summarize the mothers' highest dreams or aspirations for the children. Mothers with no aspiration differential believe the child will attain the amount of education necessary to work in both the expected and the ideal type of job. These mothers believe the child will realize the parents' highest dream for the child. On the other hand, mothers with an aspiration differential believe the child will attain the amount of education needed for the expected, but not the ideal type of job. Mothers with an aspiration differential doubt the child will realize what the parent perceives as the best or ideal job for the child. In sum, these mothers don't realistically believe the child will attain what the parent perceives as the ideal job for the child.

Instead of assuming that parents perceive only one idea about the child's future (e.g., I dream of my child going to college), we assume that parents may have multiple ideas about the child's future (e.g., I dream of my child going to college, but I don't expect he/she will). Parents' expectations and aspirations about how long children will stay in school can be directly communicated to children through demands, supports, or encouragement (Sewell & Hauser, 1976), and through various other achievement supporting behaviors (Seginer, 1983). Thus, an important goal of this study is to describe the frequency of occurrence of this differential in parents' thinking. Knowing more about this differential is important

because parents' ideas, even mixed or qualified ideas, are likely to be linked to the messages parents communicate to their children about the child's future.

Another goal of this study is to investigate whether children's academic achievement scores differ according to mothers' aspiration differential. Because the educational pathways children tend to follow are heavily influenced in the early years of school by family influences (Cowan, Cowan, Schulz & Heming, 1994, p.96), we wanted to know if a relationship exists between maternal aspiration differential category and children's report card grades and standardized achievement test scores early in the child's schooling career (first and fourth grades).

An additional focus of this study is to explore associations between the maternal differential categories and maternal perceptions of their responsibilities as parents. This association is examined to shed light on mothers' cognitions about their role in enabling children to succeed in school. Perhaps parents who have no aspiration differential perceive greater responsibility for fostering their child's development than do parents who have an aspiration differential. An empirical answer to this question may help us begin to understand some of the co-occurring parental cognitions that contribute to children's academic success.

Methods

Sample

One hundred forty-one mothers and their first- (49%) or fourth-grade (51%) child participated in the study. The annual household income of each family was $39,999 or less. Sixty-five percent of the sample earned less than $19,999 per year, and 28% earned between $20,000 and $29,999 per year. Only 6% of the sample had family incomes between $30,000 and $39,999. The mothers in the sample came from three communities in a Midwestern state. Twenty-eight percent of the mothers

were African-American, 49% were Caucasian, and 23% were Hispanic. Fifty-three percent of the children were female and 47% were male.

Measures

Expectations/Aspirations Interview. Mothers completed a structured interview about the educational/occupational expectations and aspirations they have for their child. While looking at a graphic display of categories of occupations, mothers answered questions about each group of occupations. Figure 1 shows the graphic display of the types of occupations. The occupation clusters were defined by the amount of education typically required to work in each type of occupation. The type of occupations ranged from those usually requiring some high school education (e.g., worker in a fast-food restaurant, housekeeper, etc.) to those usually requiring graduate work (e.g., physician, dentist, professor, etc.). Mothers were asked to indicate which type of job she realistically *expects* her child will hold as an adult. Mothers were also asked to indicate which type of job she believes would be *ideal* for her child to hold as an adult.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Parent Responsibility Questionnaire. Mothers completed the 30-item Parental Role Scale (Gilbert & Hansen, 1982). The scale measures parental beliefs about the amount of responsibility parents should assume for various aspects of their child's development. Mothers rated each belief statement on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all important as a parental responsibility) to 5 (very important as a parental responsibility). The Cronbach alpha reliability estimate for the parental responsibility scale was .90.

Children's Academic Achievement. The grades from the final grading period of the school year were used to measure the child's performance in school. Mean ratings of the child's grades in spelling, writing, reading, English, social studies, math and science were generated for each child. California Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) standardized achievement scores were obtained from the school corporations. National percentile scores were used in all analyses.

Procedures

Mothers were individually interviewed regarding their ideas about their child's future. The interview about occupational expectations was part of a more extensive interview designed to provide information about family contributions to children's learning. With the parent's consent, the school corporations provided children's report card grades and standardized achievement scores.

Results

The majority of mothers expected their child will hold a job that typically requires post- secondary education, and almost all mothers believed some form of post-secondary education would be ideal for the child. Table 1 shows mothers' ideas about the expected and ideal types of jobs for their child. Whereas 25% of mothers expected their child will work in a job that typically requires graduate education, 42% percent believed this type of job would be ideal for their child.

Insert Table 1 about here

Chi-square analyses were computed on the mothers' ideas about expected and ideal jobs to determine if their ideas differed by the child grade level in school or by child gender. Neither mothers' expected nor ideal types of jobs varied by child grade

level in school (expected, χ^2 (4) = 2.14, $p < .71$; ideal, χ^2 (3) = 3.34, $p < .34$) or child gender (expected, χ^2 (4) = 8.4, $p < .07$; ideal, χ^2 (3) = 4.1, $p < .25$).

The aspiration differential was computed by comparing each mother's perceptions of the expected occupation to her perceptions of the ideal occupation. The first aspiration differential group (n=54, 38%) consisted of mothers who reported believing that the expected and ideal type of occupation for the child were different. These mothers believed the ideal occupation requires more education than the mother expects the child will attain. The no aspiration differential group of mothers (n=76, 54%) believed the child would receive the amount of education needed for the expected and ideal type of occupation. The third and smallest group of mothers (n=11, 8%) believed that the ideal occupation type requires less education than the mother expects the child will attain.

Mothers who reported believing that the ideal occupation requires less education than the mother expects the child will attain were omitted from group analyses due to low frequency. This resulted in a sample size of 130 mother-child dyads.

Chi-square analyses were conducted on the mothers' aspiration differential to determine if the aspiration differential varied by the child's grade level in school or by child gender. Both aspiration differential categories were evenly represented in the first- and fourth-grade samples (χ^2 (1) = .007, $p < .93$ — aspiration differential category — 48% of mothers had children in first grade and 52% of mothers had children in fourth grade; no aspiration differential category — 47% of mothers had children in first grade and 53% of mothers had children in fourth grade). The aspiration differentials also did not differ by child gender (χ^2 (1) = .03, $p < .86$ - aspiration differential category – 44% were mothers of boys and 56% were mothers of girls; no aspiration differential category – 46% were mothers of boys and 54% were mothers of girls).

Mothers' scores on the Parental Role Scale ranged from 3.4 to 5.0. The mean parental role responsibility score was 4.5, with a standard deviation of .36. The distribution of the scores was negatively skewed, indicating parents' scores were typically high on the scale.

The children's standardized report card grades ranged from -2.6 to 2.1. The mean and standard deviation scores for standardized report card grades were -.024 and 1.0, respectfully. The children's national percentile standardized achievement scores ranged from the 2nd percentile to the 98th percentile. The mean percentile rank was 53, and the standard deviation was 26.1. Distributions for report card grades and achievement scores were normally distributed.

Preliminary Analyses

Kendall correlation coefficients were computed between the dependent variables — children's standardized report card grades, standardized achievement scores, and parental role responsibility scores — and the demographic variables of child grade level in school, child gender, maternal employment status, annual household income, and parent ethnicity. Table 2 presents the correlation coefficients. Demographic variables that were significantly related to any of the dependent variables were included as covariates in the subsequent MANCOVA analysis.

Insert Table 2 about here

Group Differences

A multiple analysis of covariance was conducted using grade point averages, standardized achievement scores and parental role responsibility scores as dependent variables and the two- level maternal aspiration variable as the

independent variable. The variation due to child gender, family income, and maternal employment status were covaried out of the analysis.

The MANCOVA revealed a significant multivariate F-test, F (3,121) = 3.66, $p < .02$. All three univariate analyses for the three dependent variables were significant (report card grades, F (1,123) = 4.18, $p < .045$; standardized achievement scores, F (1,123) = 5.64, $p < .020$; and parental role responsibility scores, F (1, 123) = 5.47, $p < .025$).

The children of mothers who believed their child will attain the amount of education needed for both the ideal and the expected job had significantly higher report card grades (mean = 0.13) than did the children of mothers who thought the ideal job required more education than the child will receive (mean = -0.25). Similarly, the children of mothers who believed their child will attain the amount of education needed for both the ideal and the expected job had significantly higher standardized achievement scores (mean = 57.7) than did children of mothers who thought the ideal job required more education than the child will receive (mean = 46.5).

The mean scores on the parental role responsibility measure also revealed a difference between the two maternal aspiration categories. Mothers who believed their child is likely to attain the amount of education needed for both the ideal and the expected job (mean = 4.61) had significantly higher scores on the parental role responsibility scale than did mothers who believed their child is not likely to attain the amount of education necessary to work in the ideal type of job (mean = 4.46).

Discussion

Typically the mothers' expectations and aspirations for their children included some form of post-secondary education. A majority of mothers (65%) expect their child will hold a job as an adult that typically requires at least a four-year college

degree. Even more mothers (86%) believe a job requiring at least a four-year college degree would be ideal for their child. While their children are in the early elementary grades, mothers envision an educational and occupational path for their child that depends on academic success across the child's years in school.

Unfortunately, many indicators suggest that the expectations and dreams these mothers have for their children's future may not be realized. Alarming national statistics on school drop- out rates suggest that low income, minority children are less likely to remain in school than those living in families with higher income levels or are non-minority status (The State of America's Children Yearbook, 1995 p.94). Further, the children of mothers with less education are at greater risk for academic underachievement than are children of mothers with more education (Snow, et al., 1991, p. 64). It may be difficult for mothers who have not attended or completed college to prepare their child for a path the mother has never experienced.

The findings of this study point to a potentially adaptive parental belief pattern that may contribute to school success within a high-risk sample. The academic achievement of children in this sample differed by mothers' belief patterns regarding their views of the children's futures. The children of mothers who had no aspiration differential earned higher grades and had higher standardized achievement scores than did the children of mothers who had an aspiration differential. There appears to be a positive association between children's academic achievement and mothers' beliefs about the child's future.

Although the design of this study does not permit identification of the causal pathways between parent belief and child achievement, it does point to the association as potentially important in high-risk samples. Perhaps the association between the mother's aspiration differential and the child's academic achievement functions in a feedback loop. That is, the mothers of children who are doing well in

school tend to maintain and possibly strengthen their belief that the child can attain the mothers' ideal dream for the child. In turn, the mothers' beliefs may cause the mother to behave in ways that encourage the child's academic achievement. On the other hand, many of the mothers of children who are doing less well in school are abandoning their ideal dreams for their child. This abandonment of the parents' dream may be communicated to the child in many ways, which in turn may impact the child's performance in school. Regardless of the direction of influence, the findings of this study suggest two different paths of association between mothers' expectation and aspiration beliefs and children's academic achievement.

Over one-third of the sample of mothers had surrendered their belief that the child will attain what the mother believes is the ideal job for the child to hold as an adult. This finding is especially noteworthy since the children are still in the early stages of their schooling careers. In fact, 42% of the mothers of first-grade children indicated they did not believe their child would realize what the parent perceives as the ideal occupation for the child. A focus for future research is to understand the factors that contribute to mothers' relatively early abandonment of their ideal dreams for their child.

The findings of this study also offer insight into mothers' thinking about the child's future. An association was identified between mothers' aspiration differential and mothers' beliefs about the amount of responsibility they perceive for fostering their child's development. Although all mothers in the sample perceived relatively high levels of parental responsibility, the mothers who had no aspiration differential perceived significantly higher levels of parental responsibility than did mothers who had an aspiration differential. This association suggests that mothers with similar expectations and aspirations for their child's future assume more responsibility for promoting the child's development.

Early in a child's schooling career there are differences in parents' views of the child's future. Some parents maintain a belief that the child will attain the ideal job while other parents have abandoned this dream. Although parents differ with respect to their views of the child's future, efforts aimed at helping parents recognize the importance of their beliefs and perceptions upon the child's educational trajectories should be explored. Further, creating opportunities for parents to examine their beliefs about parental responsibilities and their thoughts about the child's future may ultimately help parents contribute to the child's success in school and beyond.

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Table 1

Mothers' Views of Expected and Ideal Jobs for their Children's Futures

	Expected Job n = 141		Ideal Job n = 141	
	n	%	n	%
Complete some high school	4	3	0	0
Complete high school	15	10	4	3
Complete trade school	31	22	16	11
Complete four-year college	56	40	62	44
Complete graduate school	35	25	59	42

Table 2

Kendall Correlation Coefficients Among Demographic Characteristics and Children's Report Card Grades, Standardized Achievement Scores and Parental Role Responsibility Scores

	Report Card Grades	Achievement Scores	Parental Responsibility
Child Grade Level in School	.01	-.07	.02
Child Gender	.14*	.02	-.08
Maternal Employment Status	.11	.15*	-.01
Annual Household Income	.12	.16*	.05
Parent Ethnicity	.02	-.05	.06

* $p < .05$

Graphic Representation of Occupation Categories

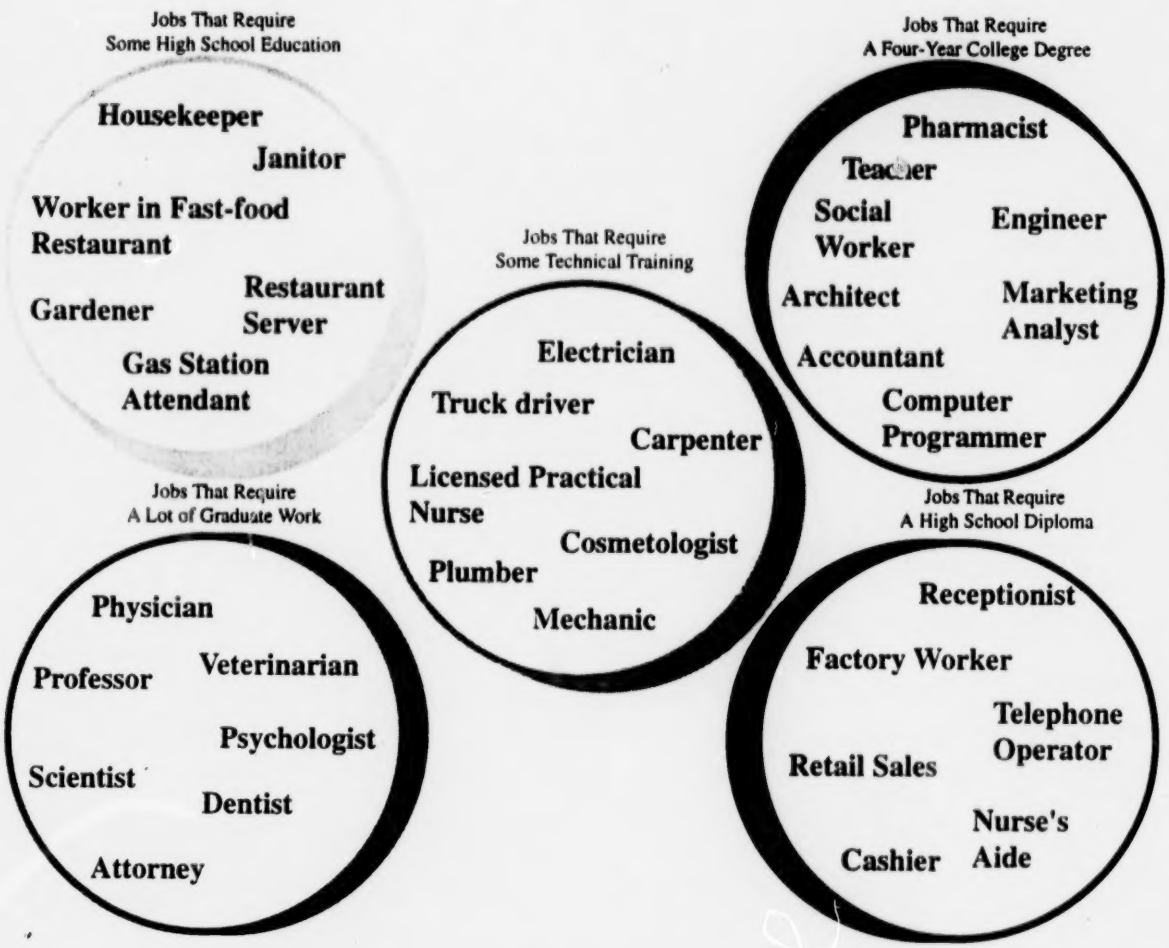

Figure 1. Occupational categories defined by the amount of education typically required to be employed in each category.